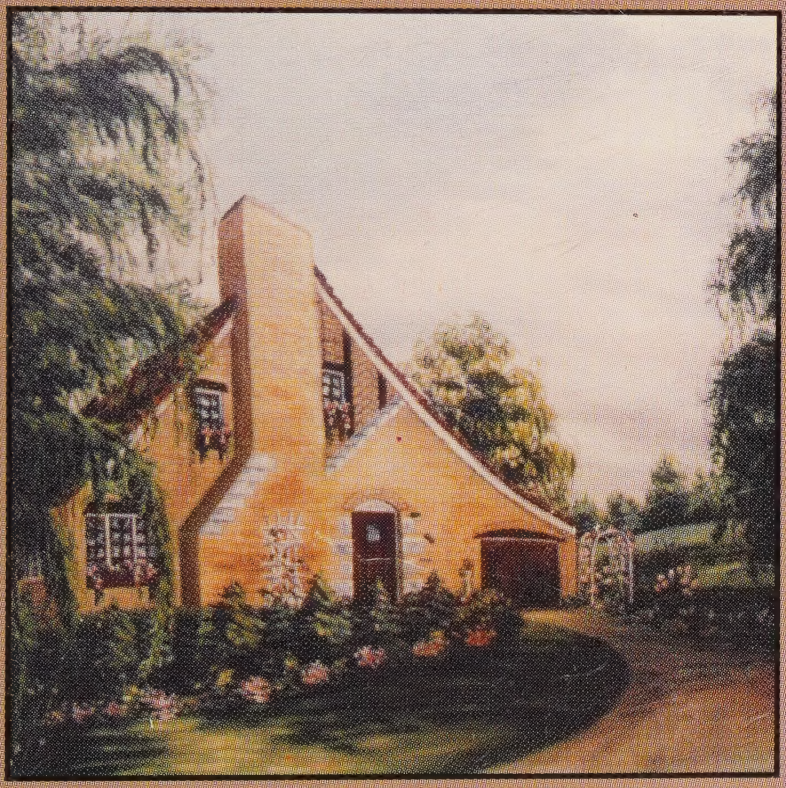
THE SECRET ROOM

AND OTHER ESSAYS ON LIFE AND FAITH



BRIAN C. BLACK

—RECTOR OF —

THE CHURCH OF THE ADVENT

Madison, Georgia

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THE SECRET ROOM

AND OTHER ESSAYS ON LIFE AND FAITH

THE MADISONIAN PRINTING COMPANY, INC., MADISON, GEORGIA 30650

"IN MEMORIAM"

JULIA BERNIER
"Doe"
1896-1986

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About the Cover: The painting on the cover was done by Julia Bernier (Doe). It is a portrait of her home with the Secret Room.

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THE SECRET ROOM

Just about every Sunday morning, I run to the local donut shop for a light breakfast between the 8 and the 10 am service. Every Sunday morning, during my brief drive down the street, I listen to an 80 year old preacher on the radio.

A few weeks ago, I got into the car, turned on the radio and heard my friend preaching:

"God is so good! He's so good to me! I wake up every morning and look at the daylight through the eyes He made. I hear the song of the birds which He created, through His ears which He also created. I eat God's food. I spend God's money. I breath His air. I walk with His feet, and He puts a smile on my face. God is so good! He's so good to me!"

I got out of the car, with my head lifted high, a smile on my face and joy in my heart. I walked into that donut shop feeling like I could conquer the world. Walked up to the counter and was face-to-face with one of the meanest, grumpiest cashiers I have ever seen! And her greeting to me was, "Yeah? What do you want?"

Within those few minutes, I felt like I had just been on a roller coaster ride. Balanced on one side with the radio preacher who saw God's presence in even the most simple things in life, and on the other side with a person who at least at that moment in her life, saw little joy or pleasure in anyone or anything.

From that experience, I came to realize that there are basically two types of people in this world. Those who go through life sour and disgruntled. Life for them is a burden. The other type of person is one, who like that radio preacher, has discovered an inner source of strength and peace - - even in adversity.

I would like to share with you how I believe we can discover for ourselves what that Baptist preacher had discovered in his life - - the joy, the power, and the celebration of living a life of Resurrection, and allowing God more and more into our lives.

When I was growing up, a person who perhaps had the greatest influence in my life was my great grandmother. For some unknown reason, she acquired the nickname "Doe."

Doe blessed our lives until just a few years ago when she passed away at the age of 90. She was a wonderfully gifted person who could create something out of nothing. She could turn a blank canvas into a beautiful seascape or mountain range in no time at all. She could create a garden out of the most remote and obscure part of any yard. From scraps of old cloth and socks, she would give birth to rag dolls, and puppets. And she could fix anything from a lawn mower to a leaky faucet with a paper clip or a bobby pin.

Doe's greatest creation of all time was "the secret room." It was a room only a select few ever knew about, located on the second floor of the home she shared with my grandparents.

It was a small unfinished room. Originally it had a normal door set in the middle of a wall. However, she removed the door and the surrounding wall, and replaced it with one solid wall. The entire wall was on hinges so it could open and close. The hinges were placed on the inside so that they could not be seen. And the wall was finished with a removable floor board that matched the other three walls in the hall perfectly. By removing the floorboard, the wall would open on command.

My grandparents used the secret room for storing things that were of value to them. Old photograph albums, old books, important papers. They stored anything that needed to be out of sight of potential thieves, and six wild grandchildren.

The room was an utmost secret. As a child, I would hear others whispering about the Secret room, and when they saw me they would stop talking. If I asked questions about it, all they would say is "Someday you'll know."

But then, one day, I reached the age of accountability. It was time for the rite of passage. I would be told about the secret room, and not only told, but my great grandmother would show me where the secret room was. And she not only showed me where it was, but she showed me how to get into the secret room!

From that day on, my life was never quite the same. Whenever I would spend the weekend at their house, I would always find a reason to have to go into the room, if only for a second. At night, I would lie in bed and I would think how wonderful it would be to have my own secret room. A room

that no one else knew about, especially my brothers and sisters. In that room I would store all those things that were of value to me. My match box car collection, and my transistor radio and my sister's diary. I would hide secret pets, a stash of M&M's and bubble gum. Knowing about the secret room was about the most exciting thing that a kid could ever experience.

Eventually, my grandparents sold the house and moved into an apartment. Several years after that, my grandfather died. The people who had purchased the house called to express their condolences. In the midst of the conversation, my grandmother inquired about the secret room. To her amazement, she discovered that the family who lived in that house for nearly two years, had no idea what my grandmother was talking about. Apparently, the secret room was one minor detail they forgot to pass along to the new owners at the time of the closing.

My grandmother then explained to them over the phone about the secret room, where it was located in the house, and how they could get into it.

I never met the people who moved into my grandparents home, but I feel a great kinship with them none-the-less. The reason for this is that I know exactly what they must have felt like when they learned of the secret room. I know exactly what they experienced the first time they saw the wall open up. I know exactly what they were dreaming about that night when they went to bed.

Can you imagine! Can you imagine what it would be like, after having lived in a house for two years, all of a sudden to discover that there was an entire room that you did not know anything about? A space that had been there the entire time and you did not know it?

I believe that it was St. Teresa of Avila that wrote centuries ago that inside every human being is a secret space that has the shape of God. And inside that secret space is a love so great that words cannot describe it. There is a power so real that nothing can destroy it. It is filled to the brim with the same creativity that created the world, and a strength so supreme, that mountains can be moved. There is a peace so serene, that nothing that may come our way in this life can pull us down.

A secret space that many people go through life not knowing that it is there. A secret space waiting to be discovered. A gift waiting to be received. Inside all of us is the key to eternal life, a life that begins now. A life of power and strength, healing and forgiveness, love and hope.

I don't think the lady at the donut shop knew about that secret space inside of her, yet.

I know my great grandmother knew about it! And I have no doubt whatsoever that the old radio preacher knew about it! And perhaps that is why he was able to say . . .

"God is so good! He's so good to me! I wake up every morning and look at the daylight through the eyes He made. I hear the song of the birds which He created, through His ears which He also created. I eat God's food.
I spend God's money. I breath His air. I walk with His feet, and God puts a smile on my face. God is so good! He's so good to me!"

Do not let another day pass you without exploring that secret part of you that you did not think was there . . .

Because it will change your life, forever!

THE CHURCH

When someone asks me about what part the church has played over my span of life, I usually respond that The Church really didn't play any part whatsoever, until my late teens.

But the older and more reflective I become (because that's what you do as you get older), I have come to realize that this is not entirely true. In fact, as I put the pieces of the puzzle together, I discover every day that The Church has played a crucial role in my life from infancy.

Although I would be the first to admit that my family could not be classified as avid church goers, there were periodic times in my childhood when I remember sincere attempts being made.

My earliest memory of such an attempt must have been when I was only four or five, and with six children in my family, I remember that Sunday morning was total chaos. One Sunday morning in particular stands out in my mind. We were running late for Church, as usual. Mother was trying to zip up the back of her dress, put on her shoes and brush her teeth, all at the same time. Father was trying to tie his tie while looking for the car keys and his wallet under the cushions of the couch. Both my parents were also shouting orders: "Bruce, hurry and finish your breakfast!" "Brad, make sure you brush your teeth." "Bonnie, comb your hair." "Brian, get your shoes on." "Bart, did you let the water out of the bathtub?" "Barrie, stop your fussing." "Bonnie, go see why your sister is fussing - - and change her diaper while you are at it."

Even at my young age I knew we were standing on a time bomb. Tensions were building. Tempers flaring. Total chaos. I asked my father to help me get my shoes on. He responded even before he heard my request, "Not now! It'll have to wait!"

It was too much for my little mind to handle, and I remember crying all the way to Church. Everyone took turns trying to find out why I was so upset, but that just made me cry even more. At this age, one doesn't necessarily know how to express his feelings, and even if he did he usually got a lot more attention by remaining silent and just crying. **EXCEPT**

IN A FAMILY WITH SIX KIDS. By the time we arrived at church I was being totally ignored, was escorted to my Sunday School Class with the last words I remember my parents saying to my teacher being, "He's all yours!"

I remember standing in the doorway, still crying, with the teacher saying to my parents, "He'll be just fine." When my parents had left, she stooped down and asked, as she wiped my tears away, "Now tell me what's bothering you." Finally there was someone who would listen!

"My shoes are on the wrong feet!" I said in my broken four-year-old voice. I remember Mrs. McVay bending down and correcting the problem. "There now," she said, "does that feel better?" That was all I needed! The crisis was over.

Isn't that a strange thing to remember? But that's the only thing I remember to this day about that Church.

And I guess Sunday mornings grew to be too much for my parents as well, because soon after that we stopped going to Church altogether.

Then, several years later, we moved and they thought they'd give it another try - - at another church in our new neighborhood.

By this time I was at the delightful age where everything in the whole world was boring. School was boring, my family was boring, the neighborhood was boring, and the most boring thing of all was, of course, Church. Sunday School was boring, the music in the church was boring, and the sermon was especially boring . . .

The only thing that made sitting through the service tolerable was an elderly lady sitting next to me, who fed me wintergreen Lifesavers. She must have known that my parents would not have any part of my eating in Church, so she ever so slyly would slip one Lifesaver after another into my hand, without either one of us ever taking our eyes off the preacher.

Out of the corner of my eye I watched the leftover green and silver wrappers being shaped into a perfect ball packed tightly by her thumb and index fingers, and then when the offering plate came around she would carefully place that ball into the plate along with her dollar bill. We'd glance quickly at each

other and she would give me a wink as we both stifled a giggle at her misdemeanor. It was our secret.

That's the only thing I remember about that Church. I guess my parents thought it was boring too, because after a month or so we stopped going there also.

The next time I stepped into a Church was a decade later, as a teenager. This time it was submitting to my friends' unrelenting pressure to visit their Church. This was in my hippie stage, and I walked into the Church on bare feet, shirt tail hanging out and hair down to my shoulders. I wasn't alone in my attire as my friends were in that same hippie stage. However, I felt somewhat uncomfortable seeing older adults in nice Sunday suits and dresses.

At the end of the service, a banker-type, father figure came toward my friends and me. This is it, I thought, he's coming to say, "No shirt, no shoes, no service." Instead he thanked me for visiting and hoped that I would come back again. Then he gave my friends and me hugs and introduced us around. I don't think I've missed a Church Service more than one or two Sundays since.

I don't know why those three people remain so vividly in my mind, but I do know this - - if it hadn't been for them I would not be standing in a Church today. I know now that in those simple acts of love and acceptance, I was standing face to face with Christ.

For when I was alone, Lord, you came to me.
When I was hungry, you gave me food to eat.
When I was thirsty, you gave me drink.
And when I was a stranger, you welcomed me.

Since those times the church has welcomed me home time and time again. It was at her altar that Carole and I committed our lives to each other in marriage. It was at her altar that our children were baptized into the Kingdom of God. And here that we have buried our loved ones. It has been in the Church that we have received strength against life's blows, and given thanks for life's blessings.

To Mrs. McVay, who fixed my shoes and my heart; to the lady with the Lifesavers who understood a bored eight-year-old; to the businessman in the Sunday suit who welcomed a straggly teenager into Christ's fold, I say thanks, for the light they provided and continue to provide in my life.

CLIMBING TREES

There is a magnolia tree outside my office - - one of the largest trees I've ever seen. Not a week goes by that I am not sitting in my office only to hear the branches and leaves begin to quiver and shake. When I turn and look at the tree I can usually see only the bottom of four, six or eight Nike tennis shoes delicately balanced on a limb half their size. Of course, the boys can't see me, due to the thick foliage. But they are there!

I usually sit back in my chair and watch the feet float upward, out of sight. I take a sip of my coffee and find myself remembering how exciting trees like that were for me when I was a kid. I recall the hours I spent in trees with friends, gossiping about girls, telling secrets and playing Tarzan or spaceship.

I take another sip of coffee, flip a few pages in a book, still listening to the limbs shake, and once in a while hearing a giggle or a laugh. That usually makes me giggle or laugh a little, too.

But then something happens to me and the very next second I find myself at my office window. I open it quickly and yell out, "You boys shouldn't be in that tree! You could fall and get hurt. Now, get down immediately!"

Closing the window, I sit again, with fond memories of being a kid in a tree, now replaced with visions of lawsuits, broken legs and arms, angry parents and things that probably won't happen, but could.

Then, I really get depressed and begin to think of all those old people - - some of them even as old as 35 or 40 years of age - - who used to yell at me when I was a kid. People who would ruin all the fun. Like Mr. and Mrs. Lewin, for instance. They would spend their days yelling out their window at my friends and me. Yelling things like, "You can't play ball there, you might knock out a window. Don't go in there, you could fall through the floor. Don't cut across my grass. Don't pick those flowers!"

When the Lewins weren't yelling out their window we were convinced that they spent the rest of their time in their basement making those signs one sees all over town. Signs that say things like: **NO PARKING. NO LOITERING. NO BIKES. NO SHOES, NO SHIRTS, NO SERVICE. NO BALL PLAYING. KEEP OFF THE GRASS. KEEP OUT. BEWARE OF THE DOG.**

I swore I'd never be like that when I grew up. Yet here I was, acting just like the Lewins, or even worse, my father, or some other adult-type whose whole purpose in life seemed to be to ruin a kid's fun.

Sometimes I wonder when I crossed that invisible border, that thin line that has curiosity, fun, awe, wonder, mystery and joy on one side; worry, caution, gloom and doom on the other. When did I stop climbing trees and begin yelling out my window at innocent kids who do?

Maybe tomorrow, when I hear the leaves shaking, I'll go out and climb the tree with the boys.

BABY DOLL AUDITIONS

"This will be a sign to you; you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloths and lying in a manger."

On the fourth Sunday of Advent, the children in the kindergarten Sunday School class were having Baby Doll Auditions. They were asked on that Sunday to bring their favorite dolls, and from those dolls, one would be chosen to play the part of the infant Jesus lying in a manger for the Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve.

Since I was fairly new at the parish, I had the honor of being invited to the class that morning for the purpose of choosing the doll that would play the part.

Sounded easy enough, especially for a priest.

At 10 in the morning I entered Mrs. Jones class to find a group of 10 or 12 children sitting on little chairs with their dolls in their laps. They were all hoping that their doll would be the one to have the honor of playing the part of baby Jesus.

As I looked around the room, I was surprised to see the saddest group of dolls I have ever seen, gathered together in one room. The kids looked like worried parents bouncing their children on their knees in the waiting room of the pediatrician's office.

Megan was holding her doll, Bessy, a cabbage patch doll with the original clothes she had on when she was adopted from K-Mart three years ago. Bessy's clothes had never been washed, and Megan was proud of that.

Lisa held her doll, Thelma. Thelma had very short, matted, orange hair. Her hair had been long at one time, and brown, until one day when Lisa decided to play beauty parlor with Thelma. After Thelma had her hair cut, she had it shampooed with Clorox Bleach.

Melanie brought "Angel," her favorite doll. One of Angel's eyes wouldn't open, and the other eye wouldn't close. One of her arms was missing. Melanie told me Angel had lost the arm in an elevator accident at the mall.

Karl, the only boy in the room, brought his GI Joe with him that Sunday morning. GI Joe was nude as a Jay Bird, and his head was full of teeth marks, the result of an

argument with a dog.

As I sat there scanning the dolls and the kids holding them, Mrs. Jones piped in. "Perhaps if you children could tell Fr. Brian why you think your doll is the best choice to be the baby Jesus, that will make it easier for him to decide."

"My doll stays awake while I'm asleep at night and scares off bad stuff," said one little girl.

"My dolly is the best friend in the whole world," said another. "When no one is around, she plays school with me."

Another little girl spoke up and said, "She helps me cry when I'm sad, and when Mom and Dad fight, she whispers happy things in my ear."

I sat there in awe and wonder listening to what these kids were saying, watching the dolls in the laps come to life before my eyes.

I don't know if you've read the story of the *Velveteen Rabbit,* but what the kids were saying reminded me of an often quoted scene in the book when a toy rabbit and a toy horse are talking to each other . . .

"What is real?" asked the rabbit one day, as they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, just before Nana came in to tidy up the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the skin horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the skin horse for he was always truthful. "But when you are real, you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, " or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the skin horse. "You become. It takes a long time. Generally by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't really matter at all, because once you are real, you can't be ugly except to the people who don't understand."

All of the dolls that came to Sunday School that morning in

hopes of playing the part of Baby Jesus were definitely well loved and very real! They had been hugged, kissed, bathed, drooled on, colored with crayons and markers, run over by tricycles and wagons, dragged through mud puddles and tears. They were all stained and marked and smothered in love.

"Well now, let me see," I said as I looked about the room, "Whose doll will play baby Jesus this Christmas?"

All the kids were sitting on the edge of their seats with their hearts beating, wanting ever so badly to have their doll chosen to be the one.

"This is such a difficult decision," I confessed to them, "they all would be a wonderful Christ Child." Perhaps if I could see what they looked like lying in the manger it would be much easier to decide. So I led the kids with their dolls into the sanctuary. One by one they took turns placing their dolls into the manger.

When they had finished, I told them that I had made my decision. But before I announced the winner, I explained to them that the doll would need to stay in the manger during the two weeks of the Christmas Season.

The kids hadn't thought about that. And from the looks on their faces I could see that their expressions had changed as they thought about the long nights in bed without their best friend, or those long lonely rainy days with no one to play with. Not to mention how lonely the doll would be here in this big, scary and empty church for so long a time.

All of a sudden, the dolls were being held tightly against little chests, and I was getting looks from them that said, "Don't you dare choose my doll!"

I announced the winner - - Thelma. But Lisa declined. I announced the second runner up, but she also declined. Finally I simply begged for someone to volunteer their dolls for the part - - with no response. Even GI Joe declined.

Sweat broke out on my forehead. I envisioned an empty manger in the church on Christmas Eve. What I thought was going to be an enjoyable and easy task of choosing a doll was quickly turning into a nightmare!

I looked to Mrs. Jones with a panicked look. She quickly

picked up on my desperation. "Don't worry," she said, "it happens every year."

Then she went to the sacristy and came out with a doll already wrapped in swaddling clothes. "Do you think this doll would work?" she asked her class. They all gave overwhelming approval.

"But you know," she said to the class as she placed the doll in the manger, "I still think all of your dolls would make a wonderful Christ Child. I therefore commission all of your dolls to play the part of the Baby Jesus this Christmas. But they don't need to stay here. They belong at home with you. So go home now, and take your friends with you. Hold them close and tightly in your arms and in your hearts, and they can still be the Baby Jesus. Because that's what the real baby Jesus would want. To be taken home to live with you in your home, to be your friend, and to be close to your hearts. He wants to be there when you're frightened and lonely. He wants to share his love with you, too."

When the class was over, all the kids marched out with their honorary baby Jesus in their arms, and smiles on their faces.

A job well done, Mrs. Jones.

THE HOLY RUSH HOUR

A lot of people complain about the traffic in Madison. I will admit that, for a small town, we do have our share. However, in nearly two years of living here I have yet to see a real traffic jam.

Now Boston has "real" traffic jams. Bumper-to-bumper traffic moving about an inch an hour is an everyday occurrence there. Horns honk. People hang out of the car windows yelling at the people in the car ahead of them who are hanging out of their windows yelling at the people ahead of them. Not a pleasant experience!

Once I even witnessed a fist fight between two motorists because of a radio that was too loud.

The closest thing to a "real" traffic jam I have experienced here in Madison occurs on Sunday mornings. I call it The Holy Rush Hour. It is a kind of traffic jam - but not really. It happens just before 10:00 a.m. on Main Street. There are six churches in an approximately two-block area, and often traffic comes to a standstill as worshipers attempt to reach their respective destinations.

Last Sunday the traffic came to a standstill. There was a "Methodist car" in front of the Baptist Church trying to make a turn. There was a "Presbyterian car" in front of the Methodist Church, also trying to make a turn. A "Roman Catholic car" coming from another direction stopped to let the "Methodist car" turn. There were several cars behind each of the stopped cars. Everything came to a halt. No one was moving.

I began to panic. I had lived in Boston. I knew what can happen in a traffic jam! A window in the car opposite me went down. A head emerged. In another car I saw the window go down and another head emerge. The scene was tense!

"How's your mother doing," called the Methodist to the Baptist. "She's doing much better, thanks!" replied the Baptist to the Methodist.

The Presbyterian honked his horn at the Roman Catholic. The Roman Catholic waved at the Presbyterian. They rolled

down their windows and talked about the weather and the new restaurant in Rutledge.

And while the Methodist chatted with the Baptist, and the Roman Catholic chatted with the Presbyterian, the Episcopalian smiled and thanked God he lived in Madison and not Boston!

THE PARTY OF THE YEAR

"On the wall in my study," a fellow priest writes, "I have a precious photograph taken in a hospital room a couple of years ago. It's a picture of a young couple. He is still wearing the surgical suit that is required in delivery rooms, and she is sitting up in bed. They are clearly worn out and exhausted. Yet there is a joyous sparkle in their faces, an expression of peace, relief, pride, humility and thankfulness, all rolled together - -because in their arms, wrapped in white blankets is a newborn child, weighing 9 pounds, one ounce, and 21 inches tall. Nothing in this world was more important to them at that moment than their baby.

"That's the way it is when a child is born. Even though I do not know each of you who read this - - - I could never know everything about your life and what it has been like - - -I do know that there was a moment in your life when you, too, were the most important person in the world to many, many people. They celebrated and rejoiced that you had come into this world."

He goes on to say that our birth was our big moment in history, "when people laughed and cried and hugged each other. They smoked cigars. They drank champagne. They forgot all their problems, at least for a while, just because of our birth. That one incredible moment in history when we came into the world."

I don't know about you, but to me, it doesn't seem very fair at all. The one time in our lives when we are showered with all that unconditional love and affection, and we are too young to even notice!

"We never tire of the story of that day or night when we were born. Nor do we ever tire, it seems, of hearing our parents and grandparents and older siblings tell stories about what we were like growing up." (John W. Yates, *Seven Moments*).

This past week, my father was in town for a brief visit. And just like every other time we are together, he always brings up stories about me as a kid. It's always lots of fun and heart-

warming, until he gets into what I was like as a teenager. Then my mood changes. Sweat breaks out on my forehead, and my right eye begins to twitch.

The way I remember it, I had to have been a parent's worse nightmare during my teenage years. I was constantly getting caught doing the things I enjoyed most, and it seems that every other day I was being grounded for one thing or another.

The more I was punished, the angrier I became, and the more I drifted away from a loving parent/child relationship.

One evening, after an exceptionally tense encounter with my parents, I was sent to my room and forbidden to go to what I was sure was going to be the best party of the year.

Around 11:00 P. M., when my parents' day had ended, and they were asleep, my day was just beginning. I stuffed my pillows under the covers in the shape of a sleeping teenager, using my world globe as a head, and crawled out the window onto the roof, tiptoed over to the other side, jumped down onto a brick wall, and with one small leap over the hedges, was on my way to the party.

Around 4:00 A. M. I found my way home in the dark, climbed up the brick wall to the roof of the house, tiptoed over to the other side, and crawled back through the window. I carefully climbed into bed and began to rearrange the pillows. In doing this I accidentally bumped the globe with my elbow. The globe began to roll off the other side of the bed. I flipped over and caught it in midair, only to see my mother lying in the other bed, staring at me.

In those few seconds I saw my life pass before my eyes. I was sure my life was over. She just lay there looking at me. I could see that she had been crying. Silence.

"Where have you been?" she asked softly, almost in a whisper, as to not wake up others in the house.

"Just out," I responded. I remember being disappointed in my answer. If I had had the slightest inkling that I would be caught I would have been prepared with a good lie. But I had been caught completely off guard.

"I was worried that something had happened to you." More silence. "I'm just glad you're home," she said. And then she

got up and leaving my room, closed the door behind her. No more questions. No more discussion. And I really don't remember if the incident was ever brought up again.

All I do remember is lying in my bed after she had gone, looking up at the ceiling, still holding the globe between my two hands, wondering how long she had been lying there, waiting for me to come home. And why the tears? What was she thinking about?

Somewhere deep inside me, I knew she wasn't thinking what a rotten kid I was, or how often I had hurt or disappointed her.

Was she remembering that night on June 4, 1957 when I was born into this world - - when they drank champagne and smoked cigars - - laughed and cried and hugged each other? Or my first steps? My first word? My first day of school? Was she thinking that I had run away, or had disappeared from her life forever?

I don't really know what happened to me that night, but inch by inch things began to change in my life and in that fractured relationship. I think that is because, when we come face to face with such compassion and love of another human being, we are never the same person again. We are, in reality, standing in the presence of God. Our whole world is turned inside out and upside down. Our lives are transformed by its mysterious, yet wonderful power and we find ourselves looking into the eyes of Christ himself.

Our faith reminds us of two very important things - - lest we forget.

The first. As human beings we have this tendency to wander, to drift away from the love of God. That love given to us on the day of our creation, when the earth and heavens and all the angels rejoiced.

The second is simply this. Even when we do wander from that love, God always welcomes us home again!

Creation and Redemption. Two of the greatest gifts we will ever receive. Two of the greatest gifts we will ever give.

THE APPOINTMENT

I woke up on Friday morning with butterflies. Today was the day. I had to be there no later than 11:15. I could not figure out why I was so nervous, but I had those same feelings you get before you have to go for a root canal at the dentist.

After I showered and shaved, I went into the kitchen for breakfast. I poured a glass of orange juice, yanked off a banana, and sat down at the table. "Is that all you are having for breakfast?" my wife asked. "I don't think I'm feeling very well," I responded. "Well, you know you have your 11:15 appointment, and sick or not, you have to go!" she replied.

After I arrived at my office that morning, I kept trying to figure out why I was so nervous about the 11:15 appointment. After all, I was only going over to the Primary School to have lunch in the cafeteria with my daughter. But even after more years than I wish to admit since I have been in school, I still have this great fear of being sent to the principal's office, and pop quizzes, and dropping my lunch tray in the lunch room.

I realized how ridiculous it was for a 35 year old man to be worrying about years past. I am a grown adult, and I do not have to worry about such things. This will actually be fun. Nothing to worry about.

I arrived at the school at 11 o'clock. I stopped to read the sign on the front door that said, "ALL VISITORS MUST REPORT TO THE OFFICE." As I read it I shined my shoes on the back of my pants, straightened my tie, and combed my hair all at the same time.

As I entered through the door of the school, I felt myself shrinking from a height of 6'2 to 3'1 in a matter of seconds. Of course, the first person I spotted was Dr. Myers, the principal, coming down the hall. Boy was he tall! I ducked into the office before he saw me, and I signed myself in.

Making my way down the maze of hallways, I found Ms. Phelps room. Upon entering the room, Ms. Phelps said, "Good morning Mr. Black."

"Good morning Ms. Phelps," I responded in a voice three octaves higher than my normal voice.

"Have a seat over there," she said. "You know, you are fifteen minutes early!"

"I'm terribly sorry. It won't happen again," I replied as I stumbled backwards four feet into the smallest chair I have ever seen, sending it sailing across the room. There were 25 kids in the room. 24 of them broke out into uncontrollable laughter. The other one - - my daughter - - had this "I've never seen this man before in my life" look on her face.

After we sang a few songs, it was time to line up and go into the cafeteria. Lining up behind the line leader of the day, we began our procession through the halls. I accidentally stepped on the heel of the shoes of the kid in front of me pulling his shoe half way off. He gave me a mean look as if to say "I'm going to beat you up after school." Carrie said to me, "Daddy, watch where you are going!!!" She looked at the boy and gave him that "My dad's a "jerk" look.

As we proceeded to the lunch room, Carrie laid down the law. I was not allowed to do my silly faces to the other kids. Nor could I talk marcian in front of her friends, or play "see food," or chew with my mouth opened, or slurp my milk - - like I do at home, she said.

In the most maternal matter, she carefully showed me the tricks of the lunch room. Where to get the trays, the napkins, the silverware. She scolded me for opening the wrong end of the chocolate milk, reminding me to always look for the arrows. But it was too late. I had already opened the wrong side, ripping it to shreds, and tearing it just enough for it to dribble down my shirt at the first sip.

Carrie quickly looked around the table to see if any of her friends were watching me frantically dabbing at my shirt with my tie. When I looked up at her, she rolled her eyes back into her head, and whispered in a most disgusted tone, "DADDY!"

At the lunch table I felt terribly uncomfortable not only because my legs would not fit under the table, but also because I had no idea how to carry on a conversation with five year olds. I asked the kid across from me what he thought of Bill Clinton, and he just stared at me. I don't know what came over me, but all of a sudden, I gave him one of my silly faces.

The next thing I knew Carrie was jabbing her elbow into my side, reminding me that I promised to behave.

The last thing I wanted to do was to embarrass my daughter in front of her peers. I tried to behave. Really I did.

After lunch we lined up again to return to the classroom. Upon arriving back it was time for my visit to end. "Well, I had better be going. Thanks for letting me have lunch with you," I said. Carrie said good-bye with her mouth, but her eyes said, "Don't you dare kiss me in front of all my friends!" So, I patted her on the head and departed.

And I prayed as I left the school. I prayed that Carrie will never forget that no matter how independent she may be, neither her earthly father, nor her heavenly one is very far away. And that we both will be there for her as she journeys through this life - - whether she likes it or not!

SHADOWS

Brother Roger, founder of the community of Taize, wrote in one of his books: "Outside the light of Christ, the shadows fall. They envelop us. We are in the night. But in the midst of darkness, there shines a source of light. It is ours to focus our eyes on the light until the day begins to dawn and the morning star rises in our hearts.

"A plant that is not turned towards the light withers away. How can believers allow an interior life to grow within them if they forget to look at the light of God and concentrate only on the shadows?"

The first house I remember living in was one of those old houses that had a third floor. Our third floor had two unusually shaped bedrooms with lots of nooks and crannies, several dormers and slanted ceilings. One of the bedrooms was shared by my two oldest brothers. The other room was a kind of storage room where my family put things that we couldn't find any other place for.

Whenever I had the chance, I loved to go up to that room. Being so high up, it was like being in a tree house. I could spend hours watching squirrels and birds on tree limbs that were literally right outside the windows. When that got boring, I would find myself playing with old suitcases, broken typewriters, digging through boxes and drawers and closets looking for treasures. My imagination ran wild.

I remember begging my parents relentlessly to let me have that room as my bedroom. And eventually through my persistence, they gave in. One Saturday morning, I remember seeing my father make numerous trips down the stairs, carrying boxes of junk from that room down to the basement; then dragging my mattress up the steps to the third floor, along with everything else from my second-floor bedroom.

When he had finished he called me up and asked, "Well, how do you like your new room?" I have to admit that I was somewhat disappointed. That room wasn't nearly as exciting without the suitcases, broken typewriters and old boxes. But it was too late now. "It looks great! Thanks, Dad!"

And it really was great. Until that first night when it was time to go to bed. You see, at no other time in life is the imagination more alive than it is when you are a child, lying in bed at night. In the dark. In the silence. When you're 7 years old. In a new bedroom. On the third floor. With two older brothers in the room next door. Brothers who didn't want you there in the first place, and who knew how to make ghost sounds, and pound on pipes, and make doors squeak. Brothers who knew how to sneak into your room and get under your bed without you seeing them, and at just the right time how to reach up and grab your foot from under the covers.

By the time my parents had responded that first night to my scream of death, and reached my bedside, of course my two brothers were tucked back in their beds pretending they were sound asleep.

I don't think I slept that whole night. The branches from the trees outside rubbed and thumped against the walls and windows, and they also made the most unbelievable shadows you've ever seen dance around in that room each time the wind blew or there were headlights reflecting from a passing car on the street three stories below. Monsters, ghosts and beasts of all kinds came in through the window, slithering across the slanted ceilings, down the wall, and right under my bed! And there they were, waiting for just the right moment to reach up under the covers and grab my feet!

Even at seven years old, I knew they were just shadows. But their distorted images loomed large in my imagination. And I let something I knew couldn't hurt me get the best of me for weeks on end. And because of the shadows, the room I wanted so desperately became a tomb every night when the sun set.

Needless to say, bedtime wasn't only unpleasant for me, but because of my tantrums, tears and having to be dragged up the stairs by my father, the same way he had dragged my mattress up a few days before, bedtime was also very unpleasant for everyone else in my family.

And then something miraculous happened. One afternoon my father came home from work with a small bag in his

hand. "Here," he said, "I thought you might like this." I opened the bag and inside was a small, nondescript night light he had picked up at a five and dime store. "Tonight, when you go to bed, keep your eyes focused on the light," he said, "and the shadows won't seem so bad."

And that night, when I went to bed I discovered the secret to the problem of shadows. You see, shadows are caused when there is not enough light. The more light there is, and the more one keeps focused on that light, the less power the shadows have.

Even as adults, we have many shadows in this life that haunt even our waking moments. Shadows that are just as real as they are for a young child lying in bed at night. Shadows that take the forms of monsters and beasts, and things that go bump in the night.

And I am sure that each of us can name our shadows that have such power over our lives even today making it difficult to focus on anything else. Problems at work, problems at home, depression, deteriorating relationships, illness, failures, and fear. And we all know how these things can begin to consume us unmercifully if we let them.

I've learned in my own journey through this life that there will always be the presence of shadows. But where there are shadows, there is also light. And by searching diligently for that light - - and what I mean by that is entering more deeply and intentionally into the life of prayer and worship, and by letting the holy scriptures speak to us and teach us - - by searching diligently day by day for the light of Christ that has been placed within us, the less power those adversities have, and the more power Christ has to work the miracles of hope and healing, grace, and forgiveness, and love.

I'll always remember the secret to the problems of shadows. Shadows are caused when there's not enough light. And the more light there is, and the more we keep focused on that light, the less power the shadows have over us.

Who would have ever thought that a simple night light burning in a third floor bedroom would teach me one of the most profound lessons for life, and faith?

THE FUNERAL

This past weekend we went up to Charlotte. It was wonderful seeing all the family together for the first time in more than a year - uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, grandparents - they were all there.

On Sunday afternoon everyone gathered at the home of Carole's brother. Even though their home is fairly large, we were all squished together in the den. There would have been more seats in the living room, but the den seemed much more appropriate. No one seemed to mind sitting on the floor or leaning against the fireplace. There were legs and feet everywhere, and if we had all tried to stand at the same time it would have been impossible to untangle ourselves.

There were a dozen different conversations going on at the same time, intermingled with the sound of an occasional dog bark or a kid's giggle. None of the family "stuff" came up as it does when only a few of us get together and talk about the ones not present. The "stuff" wasn't the least bit important today. Actually, in the entire scheme of things it is never important. In our relationships, we should celebrate more of what we have in common, not waste our time together talking about the differences.

On that afternoon, the differences didn't matter. We were thankful to be with each other. We laughed and hugged, made a big to-do over the little ones and pampered the elders. We ate a lot of food, teased the teenagers about their boy friends and girl friends, wrestled on the floor with Michael and Carrie and shot a video of Grandpa snoring in his chair.

In the midst of it all, we couldn't forget what had brought all of us, save one, together for the weekend. Why does it always take a funeral to bring the family together?

IT WASN'T ME

When I was six years old, I learned to write my name. I was so proud of my accomplishment that during the following weeks I wrote my name on everything and anything - - on windowsills, walls, bedspreads and doors. Every day I was reprimanded, and was forced to wash whatever I had defaced that day.

After several weeks of this, my mother confiscated all writing utensils in the house in hopes that this would deter me. But it didn't.

One day, when I couldn't find anything to write with, I came across a pocket knife in the kitchen junk drawer and proceeded to carve my name in the coffee table in the living room.

It took my mother no time at all to discover my masterpiece. She called me into the living room, pointed to the table saying in her deep, *you're gonna get it* voice, "Who did this!?" I had to make some pretty quick decisions.

"I didn't do it," I said.

"It looks exactly like your writing, and it is your name . . . and you didn't do it!?"

"No, Ma'm," I responded.

My mother was as shocked at my response as I was. But it was too late. I had to stick to my story.

"Well, if you didn't do it, then it must have been one of your brothers or sisters," my mom said. And then she proceeded to call Bruce, Brad, Bonnie, Bart and Barrie into the living room.

She pointed to my name carved in the table and said to them, "Brian says he didn't do this. It must have been one of you. Which one of you carved Brian's name in my coffee table?"

Total silence.

My mother proceeded to announce that unless someone admitted to the crime, she would spank everyone - - - except for Brian, because he said he didn't do it.

And then my mother did a remarkable thing. She did it! She spanked all of them, although not very hard. One by one she

spanked them, with her eyes fixed firmly on me the entire time!

Of course she knew I had done it. She was probably hoping that seeing the others get punished for something I had done would cause me to break down and confess. But I didn't. I didn't even blink an eye. After all, my life was at stake. It didn't matter what happened to them as long as I got out of this alive.

But I learned something that I will carry with me for eternity. That is, if I don't take responsibility for my decisions and actions, others will. And that's a heavy load for you - and them - to carry around.

Thanks for the lesson, Mom. Sorry Bruce, Brad, Bonnie, Bart and Barrie. Signed. Brian.

A RUDE AWAKENING

I don't know what lives in the bell tower of the church. However, it must be a squirrel or perhaps a raccoon. I know this because last Sunday, I peered out of my office window to the snow-covered roof of the Church next door. Near the steeple I could see chaotic, frantic paw prints in the snow. Immediately beneath them was a smooth imprint in the snow going all the way down the steep roof.

This poor four legged creature was probably sound asleep in the bell tower during the stormy night with no idea what was going on outside. In the morning, he no doubt stepped out of the steeple onto the roof for a morning stretch, a scratch, and a yawn. Then suddenly, he realized that beneath him was slippery snow. He began to slide down the roof. He began clawing anxiously to get back into the steeple, but the snow won! Down the roof he slid. And off the roof he flew 25 feet towards the ground.

I can imagine what he was thinking as he flew through the air! He was probably cursing his misfortune - - wondering what fate awaited him at the bottom.

From my office window I followed the smooth path of snow to the edge of the roof. My eyes panned down the 25 foot drop expecting to see a dead creature below. But on the ground was only several inches of fresh snow with a small indentation. No squirrel. No raccoon. All I saw were tiny paw prints running off to the nearest tree. Amazing! The same stuff that caused his misfortune - - also saved his life. It was the snow that caused his misfortune. It was also the snow that saved his life.

How many times have we found ourselves in such a situation? How many times have we awakened only to find an unexpected crisis? The loss of a job. A bounced check. A broken relationship. An illness. And then we find as the time passes that the same thing that seemed so tragic to us, was actually a blessing in disguise.

I have heard from many people, a year after losing their jobs, say to me that now they see that that was the best thing

that could have happened to them.

I have heard from people how a crisis in a relationship helped them to gain a much deeper love for that person. Or, how the end of one relationship gave way to a more blessed one.

In other words, do not think for a minute that what you are going through with your spouse, your job, your teenager, your finances, your life - - is the end of all happiness. God always has a way of turning perceived tragedy into triumph. Often the thing that pulls us down, is the same thing that holds the secrets of the universe.

Just ask the squirrel, or the raccoon, or whatever it was.

SUNDAY AT GRANDMA'S

Saying good-bye is never easy. I know because I've seen the faces of those saying good-bye in airports and train stations. I have seen the faces of families standing at the entrance of an empty house, with the sound of the moving van driving away. I have seen people carefully placing the items on their desk into a cardboard box and carrying them down the hall. I've seen the grandparents at the end of the driveway waving to the out-of-town license plate which belongs to the car carrying their grandchildren away.

My father is the best person I know when it comes to saying good-bye. It is usually short and sweet, and entirely unemotional. If you're lucky, you might get a handshake. You see, my father is a honker. He uses the horn of his car to say good-bye, and he's been doing it ever since I can remember. And now I do it, and so do my five brothers and sisters. Whenever we depart from each others houses we beep the horn twice, and we then drive off.

I don't know about my other brothers and sisters, but I can trace this tradition back to occasional Sunday dinners at my grandparents house. You see, my father and grandmother never really got along too well. She was a smoking Democrat. He was a non-smoking Republican. She liked boiled potatoes, he liked them mashed. When it came to rearing children, he was a strict disciplinarian. She was of the "spoil them rotten" school of child rearing. At Sunday dinners they could argue with each other endlessly. We children would sit at the table the entire time watching them as people watch the ball during a tennis match.

When it came time to leave, we would pile into the car and begin to back out of the driveway, all of us wondering to ourselves whether they would ever speak to each other again. But as we drove off, we would see my grandmother waving to my father from the front door, and he would wave back. Then he would reach for the horn and beep it twice.

It was as if he were saying as he drove off, "Even though we don't always see eye-to-eye, you are still a part of my family,

and I love you anyway. Even though you disagree with the way I raise my children, and even though you vote Democratic, and even if you don't make mashed potatoes, you are still my family, you are still important, I still love you, I still need you, and I'll see you next Sunday!"

Saying good-bye for my father didn't mean the end of a relationship. It meant just another opportunity to show someone that they are loved and cherished, and that the relationship will continue to grow, to be molded and shaped. It meant moving yet one more step towards a relationship that God intends all of us to have with each other.

Frederick Buechner writes, "It was a long while ago that the words, 'God be with you' disappeared into the word 'good-bye.' But every now and again, some traces of those words still glimmers through."

I'm convinced that my father wasn't saying good-bye to my grandmother. I believe he was saying in his own words, "God be with you."

YOU NEVER KNOW

When I was in high school I was sure that by the age of 33 I would be a successful businessman, living in San Diego, California, driving a red Mercedes convertible, and would remain single until the age of 40.

I would not have believed anybody if they told me that at the age of 33 I would be an Episcopal Priest, living in Madison, Georgia, driving the same model Oldsmobile that my father drives, and would have been married for 13 years with two children and an overweight dog! And I wouldn't trade it for the world.

The fact is, we as human beings never know how our story is going to turn out. No matter how much we plan or prepare, anticipate and dream, the future always turns out a surprise.

We all wish we had control of our futures. In my pastoral counseling, one of the most common phrases I hear is, "If I had only known!" For the stories with happy endings, I hear: "If I had only known that it was going to work out this way, I wouldn't have worried so much." "If I had known that it was going to be this easy, I wouldn't have been afraid." "If I had known that I was going to win the lottery, I wouldn't have borrowed that money from my in-laws."

And for the stories with tragic endings I hear: "If I had only known, I would have raise my children differently." "If I had only known, I would have stayed in school and gotten my degree." "If only I had known, I wouldn't have let him drive in this weather." "If only I had known, I wouldn't have married him in the first place."

The fact is that we can never know what tomorrow will bring. Within the infinite boundaries of our humanness, God in his infinite wisdom has chosen not to let us see beyond the present moment in our earthly lives - - - much to our dismay.

Even with careful planning, even with what we think are thoughtful and informed decisions, we can never totally control the future. We can't write the end of the story first. Because, you see, God has already done that for us in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. And there is no better ending than that!

For, you see, even when things don't turn out like we had planned, there is still Easter. When it seems that all we have hoped for, lived for, and worked for shatters before our eyes, there is still Easter. Whether our dreams turn out better or worse than we had planned, there is still Easter. Easter! A promise to us that God holds us in the palm of His hand and offers us His grace, redemption, healing and a love that passes all understanding. God has written the final chapter - - - in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

A SNAPSHOT OF MY GRANDMOTHER

Every so often, our kids love to sit down and pull out old photograph albums. For hours we will sit and laugh at the memories of days past - - holidays, vacations, birthdays. Our kids especially enjoy those pictures of Mom and Dad when they were hippies.

All families have snapshots taken by a camera that bring back powerful moments in their lives. However, there are also snapshot moments we have that are not captured on film. These snapshots are etched in our minds and on our souls, and although we can't see them with our eyes, they remain with us forever.

I remember going to Pittsburgh several years ago for my grandfather's funeral. I stayed at my grandmother's house. A few days following the funeral she had disappeared into her room and was quietly sorting through my grandfather's belongings. When I went to her room, I found the door cracked. She didn't know that I was there. What I witnessed in those few seconds is a snapshot that will remain in my mind forever. Grandmother was sitting on the bed with a pile of my grandfather's clothes beside her. She picked up one of his shirts, balled it up in her hands and held it tightly against her face. She cried. Then she went back to the business of sorting. Her tears quickly evolved into a peaceful smile while she worked.

That one brief moment that I had witnessed told me more about her and her relationship with my grandfather than all the years up to that point.

That one snapshot in my mind comes to me often. It is just as real as if it were in a photograph album! And it has just as much power in my life.

Snapshots, whether in an album or etched in our memories, remind us that all our lives are intimately woven. Even in death, the love of our friends and relatives give us power, healing and a sense of who we are, and from where we have

come.

We have many pictures of my grandmother in our photograph albums. But my favorite snapshot, the one I've just told you about, only I can see. It's one of my most cherished possessions.

GOING OUT TO EAT

Last week was pretty tough on everyone, but especially for mothers at home with the kids. There is only so much you can do inside on a rainy day! Not to mention seven rainy days!

This past Saturday I decided that our family just had to get out of the house. We got the idea that we could drive into Atlanta to one of those wonderful Pizza Palaces where "a kid could be a kid," as the advertisement of one such establishment suggests.

Now, I had never been to one of these restaurants, so I was shocked to walk in and see all the balloons, video games, pinball machines, rides, clowns, a stage with eight foot characters dancing and singing, flashing lights, and literally thousands of kids screaming and laughing.

A life size Cheese Mouse greeted us at the door. My children's eyes were about to pop out with excitement.

We went up to the hostess and gave our names. She announced that it would be only a twenty minute wait. That sounded OK.

After 30 minutes had passed, our excitement began to subside as the wait for a table grew longer and longer. But we were determined to stick it out!

Our kids were no longer so excited. By now they were stretched out on the floor staring at the fluorescent lights on the ceiling and yawning. Every other minute they tugged at our pant legs and asked how much longer, and declaring that they were about to pass out from hunger. The flashing lights. The noise. The smells of pizza and cotton candy weighing on us is like a cloud.

My wife, Carole was digging through her pocketbook for some aspirin. The flashing lights. The noise. The smells of pizza and cotton candy. This was fertile ground for a migraine headache. Every once in a while we would look at each other and growl. Whose bright idea was this anyway?

I was pacing back and forth in the waiting area tapping my watch, sure that it had stopped. I also kept checking with the

hostess, for we were sure that they had overlooked our names.

The life size Cheese Mouse kept his distance. He knew that if he even came anywhere near me, I'd knock him out.

Sixty minutes later, as we were about to walk out in a rage, we heard the voice of an angel, "Black, party of four. Your table is now ready."

"Here we are! Here we are!" we yelled immediately, as we dragged the kids toward the front. We weren't sure they were our kids, but it didn't matter. At that moment the toys, the games and rides and balloons and flashing lights didn't matter. All we wanted was food!

After three hours from the time we walked in, we left fulfilled. The memories of nearly starving to death now diminished. I even gave the Cheese Mouse a hug. Carrie commented that that was the best restaurant in the whole world.

And we all agreed.

MY TRIP TO COLUMBIA

After my wife Carole left for France with our youth group and I had been at home with the two kids for nearly a week, all of a sudden - - - somewhere between picking up toys, changing diapers and loading the dishwasher - - - I realized that Carrie and Michael really needed to see their grandparents in Columbia.

We jumped in the car and three hours later I was sitting in my father's favorite chair drinking a coke and reading the latest edition of *Newsweek.* Grandpa was down on the floor with Michael, playing with Lincoln Logs. Carrie was sitting in my mom's lap watching Grandma struggle to get Barbie's favorite evening gown over the doll's hips.

I took a swig of my Coke and thought to myself, "Carole would be so proud of me, knowing how well I can handle the kids on my own."

The next morning I got up before the kids were awake and began to eat my breakfast. Soon I heard my father's footsteps coming down the hall towards the kitchen. I hadn't heard those footsteps in a long time, but they were just as familiar that morning as they had been every morning when I was growing up in their house.

In those brief moments I wondered if the morning routine had changed any in the past 17 years. I wondered if he would fix the coffee before he said good morning. I wondered if he would then sit down at his place and reach across the table to take the cereal box I was studying, shake it to see if there was any left, and proceed to pour it into his bowl. I knew that then he'd set the box off to the side where I couldn't reach it, waiting for me to say something. I remembered that when I didn't say anything, he would always break the silence saying, "So tell me, how's school going?"

As he entered the kitchen that morning I pretended to be reading the back of the cereal box. Actually I was watching him out of the corner of my eye. Sure enough he approached the counter and began making the coffee. "Good morning," he

said as he walked over to the table and sat down at his usual place. He reached across the table, took the cereal box, shook it, filled his bowl and placed the box off to the side where I couldn't reach it. Then, he just sat there, staring at me, waiting for me to say something. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, he said, "So tell me, how's church going?"

Things hadn't changed much! He was still dad, and I was still his child. But one thing had changed - - - all of a sudden I didn't find his acerbic probing nearly as annoying as I had 17 years ago. And for the next hour and a half we sat there over breakfast, sharing the secrets of our lives - - - until the kids woke up.

It seems as though some of life's most powerful moments occur, and have always occurred, around food, around the breaking of bread. Perhaps that is why we gather around the altar Sunday after Sunday. For you see, it is in the Breaking of Bread that we receive His nourishment and strength, where we are accepted for who we are. It is in the Breaking of Bread that we remember who we are in Christ. It is there that our relationships are deepened, where He listens to the deepest cries of our hearts and the longing of our souls. It is there that tears are wiped away, wounds are healed and our burdens are lifted to a higher place. It is in the Breaking of Bread that we receive forgiveness. It is there that Christ comes to us.

BYE, BYE, BIRDIES

Just before we left for our summer vacation, I discovered a bird's nest in a hanging basket of ferns of our front porch. It was a perfect nest, with five perfect blue eggs. Sparrows maybe, or perhaps Blue Jays. I wasn't really sure. Although I was fairly certain they weren't Ostriches.

The kids thought this was great! Every day they asked me to lift the basket down to check and see if the eggs had hatched. Every day we counted. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

While we were on vacation the kids often anticipated coming home to find five beautiful baby birds in the nest. Sure enough. When we got home the eggs had hatched. And every day they asked me to lift the basked down for a head count. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. They were all there.

One afternoon last week I carefully watered the fern. I guess I accidentally got the nest and the birds a little wet. The birds didn't like it - not one bit. They took off out of that nest into the world for the very first time. However, they kind of flew down instead of up.

Our dog thought this was a wonderful surprise! And before I could blink an eye, he vacuumed those little birds up like a Hoover Upright. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. And they were gone!

I was shocked! But I had to pull myself together and decide how I was going to respond to my children when the time came to check the nest again.

Are the children old enough to understand the sometimes painful realities of life? Should I tell them the truth?

An hour later the kids said, "Hey, Dad! It's time to see the baby birds." We walked out on the porch. I lifted down the basket as I had many times before. "The birdies are gone! Where are the birdies?" they asked, almost in unison.

I responded the best I could. I lied. Looking up into the trees I pointed. "Oh look!" I said. "They must have flown up in that tree over there. I see them. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. And there's the mother bird!"

"I don't see anything," said Carrie. "I don't see anything

either," said Michael.

"Well, they're not in the nest. They must be over there. Where else could they be?" I said matter of factly.

It worked. They were satisfied. All is well with the world. They waved good-bye to the birdies and ran off to play.

The dog and I looked at each other and winked. It was our secret. At least for now. Life's hard lessons would have to come another time - not today.

IN MEMORY OF TODD

Two weeks before I was to leave my church in Boston and come to Madison, the 22-year-old son of a family in our parish was in a serious motorcycle accident. He remained in a coma for several days before he died.

The day before his funeral, his mother came into my office and asked if she could read to me something she had written for the service. I'd like to share with you what she shared with me. It read:

"My mind is filled with images of Todd. I see him just two weeks old, wrapped in a blanket. It's 2 a.m. and the only time I can have him all to myself.

"At one year old I see him crawling into a cart by the kitchen sink, laughing and laughing because he thinks I can't see him. Or at two years old running down Haviland Street, naked and laughing, his sister sent in hot pursuit to retrieve him.

"At four years old, in pure excitement at the prospect of a trip to the beach, he accidentally hurled his little body through the glass in the back door. I was afraid I'd lose him then, but he created a miracle and everything turned out okay.

"Sledding behind the school, Todd got to ride in the front of the toboggan because he loved the excitement and the cold snow on his face.

"At nine years of age I can see him emerging from Park Street Station with a grin and an enormous basket filled with peanut butter sandwiches - he was meeting me after work for a picnic supper on Boston Common.

"Through Todd's teen years - the advent of homework and hormones, we had our share of tugs and pulls. One night after a particularly vigorous test of wills, I went to bed exhausted, and found a flower from Todd on my pillow.

"I see him at Logan Airport, radiating strength and self-confidence at the end of Outward Bound.

"Here's an image of Todd showing me his dorm room, and then one of his fixing dinner for me in his campus apartment.

"Todd's life was filled with love and energy and adventure.

His hugs were so strong he lifted me right off the floor. He called me on Saturday, a quick news-of-the-day phone call. We were both in a rush to get some place. The last thing he said to me was 'Love ya!' And my last response was 'Big Hug!' - thought we had forever to finish, sentences and hugs.

"I have an image of Todd at 22 years old, wrapped in a blanket - it's 2 a.m., and I have him all to myself for a moment before the nurse returns."

Ah, Sweet Resurrection!

When I think of the message of Easter, my mind goes back to that day of Todd's funeral, when his mother read to me that letter with the utmost dignity and assurance, with tears and a smile, reminding us of the brokeness of human life on one hand, and the blessedness of human life on the other. The letter reminded us that we had gathered to put Todd's life in perspective, to put it within the context of our Christian Faith in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ..

Go therefore, to the homeless, the destitute and the poor, and tell them that CHRIST IS RISEN! Go to the hospital rooms, the nursing homes, and the sick beds, and tell them to rise up and walk for HE IS RISEN! Go to the prisons and to those seeking forgiveness, and tell them that CHRIST IS RISEN! Their sins are forgiven.

Go tell our children. Tell the aged. Go to the hungry, the lonely, and wipe away the tears of those who mourn. Go to those who want to give up and tell them to look up. Tell the lost that you have found the way for CHRIST IS RISEN! ALLELUIA!

Ah, Sweet Resurrection!

WHERE COULD IT BE?

It was terrible! It was awful! Barbie had lost her shoe! How could such a thing happen? Tears began to roll down our daughter's cheeks. Her lower lip was quivering.

I felt the blood rush to my head. I knew what this meant! There is nothing in this world I would rather do than look for something the size of a clipped fingernail. Besides, we were on our way out the door. I needed to be in the office in five minutes and the nursery school doesn't like for the children to be late. We would have to look for it when we got home that evening. We just didn't have the time now.

"Her shoe! Her shoe!" she screamed. I knew we had no choice. We had to find the shoe. Up went the couch cushions. Upside-down went the trash baskets. Across the room went the bedspreads. Up in the air went the pillows and stuffed toys. I looked under, in, and through everything. I even shook the dog by her back legs to see if she had swallowed it. But no shoe!

"Oh, look!" cried Carrie in delight, "Here's Barbie's shoe!" Lo and behold, there it was - - in Carrie's left hand. Barbie was in her right hand. The shoe had been there the entire time. She couldn't see it because her hand was closed, she explained.

I was too exhausted and relieved to be angry at her. Besides, how many times have I looked for my wallet when it was in my back pocket the entire time? How many times have I looked for the car keys when they were already in the ignition?

A perfectly natural mistake.

CAMP MAKASABEE

Camp Makasabee is a place I visited for three years in a row with my youth group, during the Post-Christmas season. Most people have not heard of Camp Makasabee - and even if they had they wouldn't admit it.

My first visit there was with 200 teenagers who, getting away from mom and dad for three whole days, wanted to take advantage of every minute.

This isn't to say that I didn't enjoy the weekend - it was marvelous from the beginning. I had the opportunity to ride in a van filled with people through Chicago rush-hour traffic, complete with torrential rain and thick fog.

Upon our arrival at the camp it was raining even harder. The entire camp was muddy, in which the van was immediately stuck in muck to its hubcaps. It took almost an hour to free the van. All nine of us were covered with slush from head to toe. I was in a great mood by then.

After making our way to the registration cabin and taking care of registration details there, I happened to ask what the theme of the weekend was. "The joy of the Lord, Clown Ministry," answered the registrar. I hate clowns. I have never been fond of clown ministry. Now I was in an even better mood.

By 7 p.m. we had settled into our rooms. All I wanted was to take a nice hot shower and settle into my sleeping bag for the night. Once in the shower, I was doused with buckets of cold water, and when I stepped out of the shower I discovered my clothes missing. Of course, no one knew where they could be. With a towel around my waist and tromping through mud in bare feet I discovered them in the girls' dorm next door.

The highlight of the evening came around 1:30 a.m. The dorm was finally quiet and I settled down ready for much-needed sleep. As I was about to drift off I noticed an unusual odor coming through a broken window pane. The smell was not incense! Looking out the window I saw two of our teenagers behind a storage shed, smoking pot.

My heart sank because I had trusted them to obey the rules. I had worked hard with these kids and really trusted them. We

had made a lot of progress together; they had finally become a part of the group and I thought things were going really well.

I was depressed as I stood there, trying to decide how to handle the situation. I hesitated to go out to them. I was afraid of catching them, as they were of getting caught. I went out into the dark and cold, and when they saw my silhouette they threw the pot into the nearest mud puddle and swatted at the lingering smoke; but it was too late and they knew it.

We just stood there, looking at each other, not knowing what to say. There wasn't much love there in my heart at that moment. In fact, I was as angry and disappointed as I've ever been.

"I'll give you two options," I told them. "The first is to go back to your cabin right now and pack your bags. Then call your parents and have them pick you up now, we're not waiting until morning.

"The second option is for you to stay with me all weekend. You are not to be out of my sight for a second. Not once. For the entire weekend."

They chose the lesser of two evils, and for the entire weekend those two guys followed me around like little puppies. No matter where I went they had to go. We continued through the events of the weekend. Clown workshops, delicious camp meals, recreation times, with lots of laughing and balloons and singing.

It was wonderful for everyone, except the three of us. We didn't like each other at all. I felt restricted; they felt restricted, and we all resented the situation and each other.

Then Sunday morning was the highlight of my weekend - a clown eucharist! I love clowns as you know - and I especially love clown eucharists!

So our little trio went walking through all the mud, fog and mist into a sanctuary, a chapel with hundreds of bright balloons everywhere. The altar cloth was made of tie-dyed sheets. The candles on the altar were all different sizes, heights and colors. Circus music played in the background. I knew this wasn't going to be fun.

Then the procession started. In walked a clown with big old shoes, a floppy hat, red nose and orange hair. Twenty or so

kids followed with balloons. The service was to be in pantomime, so the procession was in silence. The visual excitement was supposed to be there. It was quite a procession. There was silence everywhere, with the exception of giggles, coughs and whispers. The clown celebrant held up notes to tell us what was coming next: THE INVOCATION. THE PRAYERS. THE OFFERING.

Finally came the sermon. That caught my attention. HOW DO YOU DO A SERMON WITHOUT WORDS? (*Every Episcopalian's dream!)

The clown reached behind the altar and carefully picked up a suitcase. He opened it ever so slowly, pulling out an old rugged cross, a handmade cross. He handled it with utmost care, swaddling it in his arms as he rocked back and forth. Of course! Baby Jesus!

In a few moments he pulled out a crown of thorns - made or real thorns, sharp as needles and placed it atop the cross. His expression went from a soft smile to perplexity.

He carefully walked over to the other side of the room, still carrying the cross like a kitten, and pulled out one balloon from a bunch of fifty or more. It was a big red balloon with the word LOVE across the front. He tied it onto the cross and crown of thorns.

He then walked over to the closest person - - a teenager - - and laid it in her arms. She sat there and stared at it for a few moments. Then she caught onto the idea that she was to pass it on to the next person, who passed it to the next. And so the cross continued, through 200 teenagers, and adults. The cross, infant Jesus, the crown of thorns and the red balloon.

It was getting closer and closer to us. Then the cross was handed to one of my shadows, who passed it on to me with a different look on his face. After a moment I passed it on to my other shadow, with a different look on my face.

I couldn't help but notice a different atmosphere in the room, especially for me. It wasn't magical, mystical, supernatural. In fact it was very, very natural - a calming, a peace, a joy. The paradox had permeated our souls.

I had never known the entire Gospel message could be told in such a simple manner. It was because of that cross, the

crown of thorns, and the red balloon passing through our arms. No words. Nothing else. All who were in that room felt what God feels for us in the gift of His son. The love, the peace, the forgiveness. The anger between both boys and myself seemed so silly in comparison. Nothing was ever said, but the message was certainly there. It was in those moments that I became convinced that the cross of Christ does indeed declare that relationships will be healed. Hope is given where there was no hope before. And when there's only hatred and anger and disappointment in our lives, because of His love - everything changes.

I had not had much love or compassion for those two kids during that weekend or for the world for that matter. I did not want to be there, and I definitely didn't want to be with them. But that cross - holding that cross in my hand, reminded me of what love is really all about and what our God has done for us in sending Jesus Christ.

It's a wonderful feeling. One that I shall never forget.

Thank God for teenagers. Thank God for clowns. Thank God for the gift of His son, the cross, the thorns, and the red balloon. Thank God that I was reminded on that day of the love given to us at that first Christmas morning.

V. I. P.

Last Wednesday was a terrible day for our three-year-old son, Michael. He threw up in his new cowboy hat. A little boy's worse nightmare!

He was feeling better on Thursday, so I promised him he would go to Baldwin's Pharmacy for lunch and then to Armour's Five and Dime Store to buy a new cowboy hat.

While in the store, after we had found an exact replacement for the hat, he spotted some cowboy guns. He thought these were wonderful. Now Carole and I have always said that we would never let our kids play with toy guns. However, when I saw those three-year-old eyes full of excitement and remembered how sick he had been just the day before, all my anti-gun feelings disappeared and I found myself standing in the checkout line with a new cowboy hat and two cowboy pistols!

We left the store, walking out into the bright sunshine of downtown Madison. The sidewalks were crowded with people and activity. Suddenly I remembered that this was the day that vice-president Al Gore was coming to town for a visit. That explained why the town was bustling with Secret Service Men, the State Patrol, abundant Madison Police and curious onlookers.

Stopping in front of the drug store we chatted with a friend. About the same time, the parade of vehicles of Gore's entourage was arriving in the square.

"Tell me, Michael, what's in your bag?" our friend innocently asked. Michael proudly opened his bag and pulled out his new purchase. "Well, aren't those pretty guns!" she said - - rather too loudly.

All of a sudden every Secret Service Agent and every State Patrolman and every Madison Police Office within hearing distance swung around - - ready to wrestle both Michael and me to the ground.

Fortunately we did not get arrested, but the incident gave me a new appreciation for the saying, "Being in the wrong place at the wrong time!"

PILLOW FIGHT

I've never considered myself one of those people who have "good luck." I have never won the door prize at a party. I have never won a raffle. Las Vegas and I would not get along well at all.

Several weeks ago I put a penny in the bubble gum machine at the drug store, turned the handle, and got nothing.

But last week everything changed. During dinner on Monday I received a call from someone (I didn't catch their name), who announced to me that I had won a brand new car! All I had to do was to pay the $300 gift tax by credit card and the car would be mine. What a deal!

In the mail on Tuesday I received a letter announcing that I, Brian Charles Black, was one of ten finalists in a Sweepstakes. How exciting!

Then, on Thursday, I got another call during dinner. It was from a travel agency in Cleveland telling me that I had won a dream cruise vacation for two. All I had to do this time was answer a few questions, the first of which was, "What is your credit card number?"

Of course I knew these were not free gifts. There would be a price to pay. There were strings attached. How disappointing.

After such an exhausting and disappointing week I decided to "sleep in" on Saturday morning. By 7:30 a.m. the kids had decided that I had slept long enough. I awoke to the sound of feet running down the hall. Before I had a chance to open the other eye, the kids had jumped on the bed. Michael was sitting on my stomach bouncing up and down. "Giddy up, Daddy," he squeaked repeatedly. At the same time Carrie was tickling my ribs, causing me to laugh uncontrollably. "Are you going to sleep all day?" she kept asking, in-between giggles. The dog, who had joined us by then, was frantically licking my face.

In the midst of the chaos, I grabbed a nearby pillow and bopped Carrie on the head. Michael grabbed another to bop me, but missed, hitting the dog instead. Taking hold of one corner of the pillow the dog tugged with all his might. Carrie, holding the other corner was pulling frantically with one hand

and swatting at my tickling fingers with the other. There was bouncing and squealing and tumbling and laughing. Pillows soared in the air. Blankets tumbled off the bed.

"Okay, already!!!" I cried. "I'll get up!!!"

The three of us fell back, exhausted, looking up at the ceiling fan and needing a time out. We were still giggling a little, and occasionally as we rested, one of us would poke the person nearby. In those few moments I remember thinking, "Well, maybe I didn't win the car, the sweepstakes or the vacation, but I really am the luckiest man in the world!"

Then I gave each of the kids one last poke in the side, a bop on the head with my pillow and ran into the bathroom for my morning shower.

WINNERS AND LOSERS

I remember being in fifth grade when our physical education teacher tested all the kids in the class to see how fast we could run, how capable we were on the balance beam and trampoline and how far we could throw a ball. For an entire week we were tested, one by one, with all the other kids watching. The coach never said a word. He would just stand there, staring at his stop watch or jotting notes on his clipboard about each person.

I remember when it was my turn to see how far I could throw the softball. I threw it pretty well, I thought, and pretty fast. After the throw, I stood there, rubbing my shoulder and proudly looking up into the sky, trying to locate the ball, as were all the other kids. I could hear remarks such as "Wow!" and, "Where'd it go?"

I was pretty proud of myself for those few seconds. But my triumphant moment in sports came to a quick end when the coach walked behind me and picked up the ball, which was lying but three inches behind the heel of my shoe!

My classmates were surprisingly compassionate about my ordeal. They merely lay on the ground holding their sides, laughing uncontrollably, while the coach made more notes on his clipboard.

I don't really know what impact that experience had on me at the time, but I do know that for months after that I had a recurring dream about the incident. Not a bad dream. In fact it was a wonderful dream.

The sequence of the dream was exactly the same as the actual incident, except that the ball actually went over the horizon in front of me. The final part of the dream was always a little different. One version was after throwing the ball, amidst cheers from my classmates, the coach, instead of handing me the ball, handed me a beautiful trophy.

Another version was that two days after the throw, one of the kids found the famous ball in a field three miles away. He brought it to class for me to autograph and then turned around

and sold it to another classmate for thousands of dollars.

All the endings to my dreams were of victory and winning. In the dreams were all those feelings of elation: pride, cheers, and pats on the back. Then, "poof!" I'd wake up and remember how it really was and what really happened and how I really had felt.

Life's blows can hit pretty hard sometimes, whether we are young or old, and people can treat us unmercifully when we're down. But I believe that in some miraculous way, our dreams remind us that through Christ we really do come out the winner, and our dreams really do come true.

I think that is one of the many reasons I never had the desire to look into that thing called RELIGION. Most of what I knew about religion I had learned from street preachers or television evangelists or religious tracts found stuck in our front door or handed to me in a shopping mall. All I learned from them was that I was a sinner, which I immediately translated into my being a bad person, a loser. But I already knew that; they didn't have to tell me that, and I certainly didn't need religion to remind me every day . . . school sports did that.

But thank God I did, in some way, find my way inside a church. And it was like that dream I had had years before, where I wasn't the one who lost, but the winner. In the church I didn't hear that I had lost, but that through Christ, I had been chosen a winner.

That is when I began to believe that sometimes dreams do come true.

LIVING ON THE COAST

Before I came to Madison, I served a church in Massachusetts. One of the things that attracted me to Massachusetts was that we would be living just a few blocks from the ocean.

I thought how wonderful it would be to escape any time I wanted to and go for walks along the shore, or in the summer to swim in the ocean. I also had images of how pleasurable it would be to merely walk down on the beach and feed the seagulls.

My first experience of taking a quiet walk along the water's edge was shattered when I discovered about 90,000 other people who had come to the beach with the same purpose in mind.

My second dream of swimming in the ocean was shattered when we discovered the sign, "NO SWIMMING. POLLUTED WATER."

Even the idea of feeding the seagulls was shattered. One afternoon, we took our loaf of bread and found a lonely seagull to feed. All went well until that seagull announced to all other seagulls within earshot that she had found food. Within seconds there were seagulls everywhere, hovering two feet about our heads, around our feet and dive bombing at the bread in our hands, dropping on us and pecking at crumbs everywhere. Within a matter of seconds they were gone, and there I stood with a hysterical kid in one hand and a plastic bread bag torn to shreds in the other.

But living so near the ocean was still intriguing. I wasn't going to let these small obstacles get the best of me!

One evening during a Vestry meeting I came up with a very bright idea - - a beach service. A service of Holy Communion, right down on the beach early every Sunday during the summer months.

I found a beautiful beach setting. People brought folding chairs. We used a card table for the altar. Everything seemed perfect!

Not really. On the first Sunday of the Beach Service I had completely underestimated the speed of an incoming tide, and during the Lord's Prayer I suddenly felt my shoes fill with water. The service was delayed until everyone moved to higher ground.

I also had forgotten how windy it can be at the coast, and that same summer, during one of the services wind was gusting to 30 miles per hour, blowing sand and bulletins everywhere. At communion time, a 40-mile-an-hour gust sent hundreds of tiny communion wafers in all directions. The next thing we knew, seagulls were hovering two feet above our heads, other seagulls were at our feet and we were being dive-bombed and pecked at and dropped on. People were squealing and swatting at the seagulls with bulletins and prayer books and folding chairs. Total chaos.

After the seagulls had eaten the last communion wafer they were off. But I outsmarted those seagulls! Cupped in my hand, I had managed to save one wafer. We could still have communion! After the Prayer of Consecration I lifted the Host saying , "The gifts of God for the people of God," and before I finished those words, one lone seagull flew down seemingly out of nowhere, grabbed that wafer from my fingers and was off.

I thought of that this past week as I chased a bird out the front door of the church with a broom.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Recently I heard about a checkout clerk at a grocery store who leaned over the counter, addressing a boy who had been standing for several minutes in front of the candy shelf. "Are you trying to steal some candy?" she asked. "No," replied the boy, "I'm trying not to!"

Do you remember how tough it was? I do! I can easily remember what it was like being held hostage with bulging eyes, in front of the candy counter - caught before candy that could talk - talking candy that would say things like, "Boy do you look hungry! I'll bet you're hungry. You better eat some candy right now, or you might die on the spot!" Or, "Come on. Put me in your pocket. No one will ever know!"

Caught between that temptation and a conscience that had the voice of Mom and Dad, reminding you that you never take anything that doesn't belong to you, or remembering the admonition, "If you don't pay for it in the store, you'll pay for it when you get home!"

Even at very young ages, we are forced to make difficult decisions. Forced to choose between right and wrong, good and evil. Caught between personal passion and the greater good. Even the youngest of children are forced to make split-second decisions that can be a matter between life and death.

It's amazing to me how many decisions we are forced to make every day that change the entire course of our lives. "Should I try to get through the intersection before the yellow light changes to red." "Should I check on the kids or go back to the office to see if I unplugged the coffee pot, or tell my spouse the whole truth, or claim that expenditure on my taxes, or sign the contract?" How many can you think of?

Often what we think might be silly or insignificant decisions to be made can make all the difference! It's almost frightening to think how often we might make the wrong one!

Here's just one more - "Choose this day whom you will serve."

IMAGINE THAT!

Not too long ago I receive an envelope in the mail from my mother. Although this may seem to be a normal occurrence to most of you, you must understand that no one in my family has written a letter since the invention of the telephone. So, I knew immediately that it must be something of great importance. After I recovered from the shock of actually receiving mail from a relative, I opened it and found a neatly folded newspaper article.

Upon unfolding it I began to read: *Dateline - - March 1990. Columbia, South Carolina.* And then in big black bold type it read: ***MARATHON MAN HITS THE STREETS.*** It continued: *Somebody, somewhere, said life's battles don't always go to the strongest or fastest. In the end, those who win are those who think they can*

. . .

"So it is when a runner hits the streets, pounding the pavement, mile after lonely mile. No referee around to determine if you played within the rules; the contest becomes a battle of the mind over the elements - - the ability to conquer the next hill and go just one more step when the threat of exhaustion is lingering. Sometimes it takes just a little more than you think you have to give. And somehow, somewhere, you manage to find the strength to carry on.

"Tom Black (MY FATHER!) runs marathons.

"The 59-year-old speaks of the experience with the passion he displays when he recalls memories of one of his six children or his ten grandchildren.

"I've never felt better - - physically or mentally," he said recently after completing the New York Marathon. 'It becomes a challenge of what your body can do. And it's fascinating to discover you can do more than you thought you could.'

"The grueling 26-mile run becomes a testament for those who have trained long and hard with one goal in mind - - to finish and nothing more. 'Everyone is there for one reason,' Black said, 'in the case of the New York Marathon, 24,000 runners

are there for themselves.'

"In early 1986 Black decided he needed to lose a little weight and took up walking as a way to accomplish that goal. Boredom forced him into a run-one, walk-one routine which soon accelerated to two to three miles in May of that same year. He ran his first marathon, the Carolina Marathon, in February of 1989. He has since run the United Way Marathon, the New York Marathon and the Huntsville Marathon. 'I just wanted to see if I could finish them,' Black said. His workouts begin at 4:30 each morning with a warm-up. The running at 5 a.m. Most weeks he runs 50 to 65 miles. At lunch he runs the steps of the NCNB Tower in downtown Columbia.

"'Marathons either kill you or cure you. You start to feel tired, and you look around and see people struggling or dropping out for one reason or another. You know the work they had put into preparation for the run. You tend to forget about you own pain. The next goal is Boston.' But Black concedes he has a long way to go. 'I'll have to cut a lot of time off. To do that, I'll probably have to have a coach,' he said.

"The only sure thing now is that he knows he'll always plan to finish. 'Once you have finished, you know you've done something you weren't sure you could do. It's a tremendous growth experience, and finishing the race makes a tremendous difference in your life.'

"'Most days, it's easier just to stay in bed,' he said with a laugh. 'But you get up. Somewhere you find the confidence you need, and you're not afraid to do anything! In the end, those who win are those who think they can.' Imagine that."

I finished the article in disbelief. I knew that he had taken up jogging a few years ago, but I never imagined he was running marathons all over the country!

Although my father is always full of surprises, he never surprises me. At the age of 50 he began to take piano lessons. I said, "Dad, doesn't it bother you to be in a class with nine - and ten-year-olds?" He responded, "It only bothers me when my instructor gives everyone but me a lollipop at the end of the lesson!"

At the age of 53, even though he was terribly afraid of

water, he learned to swim. And knowing my father he probably wore bright orange fluorescent water wings.

And now he's running marathons! But for some reason, I'm still not surprised. He's never been one to give up. The interesting thing is that all of those quotes in the article sounded so familiar to me. And as I thought about it during these past few months I realized that I had heard them all before, in one way or another.

When I had trouble in school or struggled with something I thought was difficult for me he'd say, "Sometimes it takes just a little more than you think you have to give. And somehow, somewhere, you manage to find it."

When I was afraid to do something or try something new, he'd say, "Do it for one reason only, do it for yourself."

When I wanted to give up or give in, he'd say, "The only sure thing now is to plan to finish. Once you have finished, you'll know you did what you didn't think you could, and that will make a tremendous difference in your life."

The part of the article that sounded most like my father was the quotation, *The next goal is the Boston Marathon. But Black concedes he has a long way to go. 'To do that, I'll probably have to have a coach.'*

He always reminded us that even though we have far more potential than we think we have, we also have limits as to what we can do on our own. And we should never be ashamed to ask others for help and encouragement when ours falls short. To seek the guidance and strength and power of others and recognizing our limits and weaknesses, we also discover our gifts and strengths. By seeking the help and wisdom of others, we move one step closer to becoming what God intends us to be.

You see, our faith has a wonderful way of helping us to do this, for it tells us never give up! Even when we have given it our best try and it's still not enough, Christ is there to offer His light, even in our darkest moments, His strength in our weakness. In our human limits, God finds potential. In the midst of fear and uncertainty, there is offered to us a peace, and even through death, there remains life.

Listen to this brief passage from Philippians. "Not that I

have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. I do not consider that I have made it on my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Never give up, Paul says, because out of God's immeasurable love for us, Christ helps us find the power to run whatever marathon we face - - the cornerstone - - the power of His grace and His love - - the ability to conquer the next hill and go just one more step when the threat of exhaustion is lingering . . .

"Sometimes things take more than you think you can give," my father says, "and somehow, somewhere, you manage to find the strength to carry on." Imagine that!

THE BACK YARD

The back yard! What a place! Especially in summer! That quarter-acre of land where many of us spent the first five, six or seven years of our lives. Our world was small, uncomplicated and comfortable. It was surrounded by a fence that kept out the neighborhood bullies and the wild beasts. It was a place of peace and security. Mom was only a scream away, and could come to your rescue from any point in the house in less than four seconds.

It was a place where our imaginations could run rampant. We could transform our back yard from the Sahara Desert to the rain forests of South America in the blink of an eye. As we crawled under the picnic table, we entered into a secret cave full of treasures. From high in the Magnolia tree, the whole world was ours. Lying face down in the grass we talked to ants, and they talked back. A mosquito, feasting on one's arm, was never whisked away.

Before lunch our back yard could be a Civil War battleground; and after lunch, a landing spot for the Space Shuttle.

It was a place where we first experienced the miracle of life by discovering a cocoon in a bush. It was here that we also first experienced the mystery of death - - finding a dead bird and officiating at its funeral. The bird would be reverently placed in a hole dug with a nearby stick. Its grave would be outlined with pebbles from the creek, and decorated with dandelions and clover. Upon the grave would be placed a cross made of popsicle sticks. Silent prayer would then be observed for approximately three seconds. Then the ritual would be over.

As a child, my back yard was a safe, secure and exciting place for me, where life was experienced to its fullest! It was never too hot. It was never too cold. Time had no boundaries, and the imagination had no limits.

"What are you doing out there?" Mother would shout from the kitchen window.

"Oh, nothing," I would respond.

YEARBOOKS

Last week, Carrie brought home her kindergarten yearbook. She sat for hours, it seemed, looking at all the pages, pointing at different pictures and giggling at some, while telling little stories about others. I commented to her that she will enjoy her yearbook even more when she is grown up, and one day unexpectedly finds it in an old drawer, or in an old box of books.

After she went to bed, I began to thumb the book myself. My mind became flooded with memories of my own school days. The next thing I knew, I was downstairs in the basement digging through boxes looking for my old yearbooks. I was thinking how much fun it would be to reminisce about days gone by. To remember old friends, good times. I found my yearbooks from high school, and began thumbing through the pages. It was the first time in nearly twenty years I had done this. But instead of feeling nostalgic, all I felt was old!

I read some of the inscriptions people had written. That made me feel even older. A couple of them reminded me of the large academic load I had undertaken in high school . . .

"Dear Brian," someone wrote, "it sure has been fun getting to know you in CREATIVE DANCE. Before that class, I had only known you as a name, but now I can remember you as a terrible dancer. I'm just glad you'll be stepping on someone else's feet next year. Ruth."

"Dear Brian," another wrote, "This past year in Driver's Ed would have been totally unbearable without you. Every time I see someone driving the wrong way down a one way street, or causing an 8-car pile up in the parking lot of Eckerds, I will think of you. Love, Meredith."

"Dear Brian, it's been nice knowing you and cheating with you in Spanish class. I hope to see you next year. Bon jour, Jimmy."

And then there were the inscriptions that reminded me of my high level of maturity when it came to relationships with girls.

"My Dearest Brian," one writes, "For the last five years I have had the honor of knowing you, you jerk. I will always remember last year with Dede, and Virginia, and Robyn. That's the year I liked you too, and kept wishing they would all drop dead. But of course as we grow older, we grow up and realize how silly we can be at times. I really would never wish to for them to drop dead, I just wish you would. Cindy."

This one caught my attention . . .

"Dear Brian, Thanks a lot for the engagement rings. I can't wait until we get married. I will love you forever. Love Patti." (Who in the world is Patti, and why did I give her engagement rings?)

And this one was written by someone I was in love with for seven years, but she would never go out with me. "Dear Brian, a lot of people ask me why we don't go together. (So did I!). Well, I feel that it would ruin everything. I love you too much for that. I love you like a brother, and my best friend. If we dated, all that would be gone. Love, Gloria." (I hated it when girls told me that!)

The last I heard, Gloria was one high fashion model in New York. The last I saw of Gloria, when Carole and I were living in Chicago, and I walked by a cosmetic department at the mall and saw a display ad on the table. There was Gloria in the picture, all but nude as a jaybird, advertising a hot wax hair removal product.

So much has changed in twenty years. The things that seemed so important to me then seem so insignificant to me now. Even the majority of friends that I thought I would have forever are living lives that I know nothing about. I cannot even remember some of their names, or what they look like - - with the exception of Gloria.

Oh, I did keep up with one person through the years. I found her inscription in my yearbook, too.

"Dear Brian, Well another year has gone by. I can't believe we met in 7th grade. That doesn't really seem that long ago. It seems like yesterday that I was back in Junior High. We're all getting so old. I have had a great time going to church with you this year. I really like the church. Are you going to become a member? Both of our individual relationships with our Lord

have grown a lot. I know that if it weren't for His guidance, love, and patience, we would not be as close friends as we are.

He knows exactly what is right for each of us. He cares about us and keeps us going. He has such great knowledge and yet still gets down on our level to walk and talk with us. It's beautiful how perfect our hands fit right into His, so he can hold them and guide us through even the most impossible situations. He is such a great leader, listener, teacher, friend, and Father.

I hope you have a great summer and a great life. Good luck in the future. Love, Carole. P. S. I bet you and Gloria will end up getting married."

Even twenty years ago, Carole was right. God does know exactly what is right for each of us.

Happy anniversary, Carole.

MY ANGEL ON THE PARK BENCH

When I was in seminary Carole and I lived in a very urban neighborhood, full of high-rise apartments and condos. The only place to walk our two dogs was in a city park nearby. Being the only green space for miles around, the park was nearly always full of all sorts of people. Every day I would pass by a park bench on which sat an overweight, shabbily-dressed woman. She didn't have any teeth. She spit when she talked. For some reason I always tried to avoid eye contact with her, and quickened my pace as I approached her presence.

One day I accidentally made eye contact. She said that she wanted to give the doggies a kiss. (My dogs, who would normally kiss anyone, began pulling in the opposite direction!) She then asked my name. "My name is Brian," I replied, never asking her name. However, this was the beginning of a relationship I shall never forget.

Every day at 4 p.m. I'd hear her spit out my name as the dogs and I turned the corner into the park. I would see her waving furiously, with a big, toothless smile. Before long, I began planning my walks so that our paths would cross for a few moments in the day - - at 4 p.m.

From our brief conversations I learned that she lived across the street, in a nursing home and had been there for the past fifteen years. She didn't have any relatives - at least that she would claim. She didn't need any friends. She used to be rich but her roommate in the nursing home had stolen all her money - - along with her shampoo and her teeth.

She told me that the nursing home staff put poison in her coffee every morning, but she had figured that out and when her roommate is not looking she switches the cups, adding that her roommate deserved it, since she had taken all her money.

I concluded that I was being a "good Samaritan" by "being there for her" every day. However, it didn't take me long to realize that she was "there for me" even more.

One day when I returned home from the seminary there

was a message from my father on the answering machine. A close relative had died unexpectedly. In the deep grief of the moment, I felt the need, all of a sudden, to take the dogs for their walk. I found my friend sitting there, waiting for me. For some strange reason I found great comfort sitting next to her as she made a fuss over the dogs and babbled on to me about this and that.

She never knew what was going on inside me. At least I don't think she did. She didn't have any great words of comfort, but she made me laugh a few times and she gave me a big messy kiss when we departed. I knew at that point that must be one of God's angels, sitting there on the park bench, assuring those who would listen that all is well with the world.

My angel friend was there for me at other times, too, but I especially remember that one.

PLEASE PASS THE SOCKS!

In just a matter of hours our dining room tables will become the central focus of our lives. They will be outfitted with our best tablecloths, the family china and silver. In the center of the table will be a centerpiece of fresh flowers, bracketed by two candles. All available space will be filled with the components that make up our Thanksgiving Feast.

I don't know about you, but at our home our dining room table only looks like four or five times a year - for special celebrations such as Thanksgiving. The rest of the year it is usually piled high with things that would make it impossible for a meal to be served there, even if we wanted to! Each of us in our family has a favorite dining room chair, upon which we drape our coats when we return home at the end of the day. Whatever we may be carrying with us at the time is put on the table without a second thought, and stays there until needed again (which sometimes could be for months!).

So, if you happened to enter our house on any given day, other than a holiday, you would find our dining room table littered with coats, briefcases, bills and letters, children's shoes and socks, dry cleaning still encased in plastic, loose change, old Kleenex, books and toys.

But today, in a couple of hours, all the stuff will be placed somewhere else in the house where we won't be able to find it when we need it. And our dining room table will look as good as anyone else's on Thanksgiving Day.

Traditionally, it has been my job to clear the table and to set it for Holiday Feasts. I've always had this fantasy, especially for Thanksgiving, to leave all the stuff on the table - just leave it all right there - and instead of removing it, set the meal upon the table all around it.

I'd put the good china right on top of the dry cleaning, socks and coats, to remind us to be thankful for clothes that keep us warm.

The turkey could be placed in the center of the table, on top of the brief case, reminding us to give thanks that we have jobs and are able to provide for our families.

The good silver could be carefully arranged beside one of the kid's shoes or balanced on one of their toys so we might not forget the gift of children.

The bills could be used for hot plates to remind us of our obligations and commitments that in some miraculous way always seem to be met. The letters and Kleenex might be placed randomly around the table to give us a hint to give thanks for our health and for those we love.

The loose change would be a reminder that there are many people in need and we have the bounty to help them.

Our guests might be a little shocked upon arriving at our table for Thanksgiving Dinner, and it might be a bit crowded and a little inconvenient. It definitely wouldn't look quite as nice as our neighbor's table, but I'm willing to be that none of us gathered would have difficulty in remembering what it is that we give thanks for on that day!

ST. ROBERTA

I have come to discover in my life as a son, a father, and a husband, that most mothers come as close to Sainthood as anyone.

Face it fathers, we have a hard act to follow! One 17th father stated that before he got married he had six theories about raising children. Now he has six children and no theories!

A 20th century father comments, "Only a father would think his daughter has been a good girl when she returns home from a date with a Gideon Bible in her handbag."

Mothers should indeed be called saints! They have the patience of Job, and the wisdom of Solomon, and all mothers are martyrs whether they like it or not. They are miracle workers, and healers, and missionaries, and educators, and prophets, and pastors to their children.

Above all, mothers should be honorary saints because through their love, compassion, and their devotion, we as sons and daughters catch a wonderful glimpse of God's unfailing, unconditional, and incarnate love for us - - His children.

How does this work? Well, you see, mothers are kind of like God in that they are all-knowing. They know you in ways that no one else does, or ever will.

My mother, St. Roberta, knows things about me that even my wife does not know. (I have to send Mom a check each month to keep it that way, but so far it's working.)

Mothers know their children intimately. They know their likes and dislikes. They know their hopes and fears, moods and moles, their gifts and weaknesses - - and they love them anyway.

And no matter who their children become, whether doctors, lawyers, bankers, or even the President of the United States - - no matter who they become, or how important or unimportant they are, no matter who they marry, or how far away they move, mothers still know their children for who they really are.

My mother, St. Roberta, still breaks out in uncontrollable

laughter when someone refers to me as "The Reverend Brian Black." Although I know that she is proud, she still knows me as the person who carves my name in the coffee table, the person who brings home bad report cards, and the one who blows up ant hills with fire crackers. And I was even worse when I was a kid!

She knows me as the person she has forgiven over and over and over again. She is the person who still loves me regardless of how many times I have hurt her. She is the person who until the day she dies will worry if I am getting enough sleep, working too hard, eating properly, or have on clean underwear.

And what a comforting thought that is! I know that I am loved! I know that I am forgiven! I know that at least one person in this world will always welcome me into her home!

I pay tribute to you mothers. And I thank God for all mothers, for through them we can better understand God's redemption, His salvation, His tenderness, and His patience. Above all, we come to better understand God's unfailing, unconditional, and persevering love offered to you and to me.

A TRIP TO THE MALL

Last Monday I took the kids to the mall in Athens. One of the things we like to do to pass the time while driving along Route 441 is to sing.

Michael, my three-year-old, was in the front seat, so he was in charge of the radio. His job was to hit the search button to find the next song we would sing together. It didn't matter whether we knew the song or not - - as long as it had a good beat we could make up the words.

Just as we began to drive through Farmington he hit upon a station that was playing our all-time-favorite Beach Boys hit. Michael calls it the "Bahama Mama Song." We turned the volume up loud, because that's what we do with our favorite songs, and sang at the top of our lungs. We swayed back and forth to the music and bopped up and down in our seats at just the right times. The three of us were so excited! Each of us had grabbed the nearest thing that we could use as "pretend" microphones, and sang to our hearts' content. I had found a pen on the floor. Michael used his Ninja Turtle, and Carrie had found an old lollipop stick in the crack of the seat.

The three of us were oblivious to anything going on around us. That is, until I glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw a mini-van full of people behind us. They weren't just smiling or giggling. They were laughing hysterically!

It didn't take me long to realize what they were laughing at. You see, from their perspective, they couldn't see two small children, Michael and Carrie, in my car. All they could see was a middle-aged man singing into a pen and bouncing and swaying in a white Oldsmobile.

I immediately threw the pen on the floor, turned off the radio, sat up straight and tried to look intellectual. I was devastated and embarrassed. "What do they think of me?" "What are they saying about me back there in that car?" "If I could only explain that I'm not always like this! I'm actually an Episcopal Priest, an upstanding citizen in the community!"

If only I could lose them I would feel so much better. But it

looked like they were going to the mall also. At the traffic light in Watkinsville I looked back. Everyone in the car behind us was holding "pretend" microphones and singing and bouncing and swaying, and laughing.

It's amazing what power an event like that has upon a person. I haven't sung with my children in nearly a week. I'll never see those people again, yet what power they hold over me. I don't know them. They don't know me. Yet, because I'm so worried about what they think of me I have allowed even strangers to rob me of my song.

DON'T FORGET

One of the greatest gifts in the world is the realization that God is alive and active through each one of us. We don't need to go to seminary for three years. We can't all be like Billy Graham or Bishop Tutu. We don't need to be able to quote the entire Bible by memory.

God's love is revealed through our day-to-day lives, through normal people such as you and me.

What an awesome thought this is. And what an awesome responsibility. Through our very being, God reveals himself in a world that is longing for his presence. The Apostle Paul reminds us that we are the Body of Christ! We are His feet - the feet that became tired, calloused and blistered, the feet that walked from village to village, shore to shore, proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God.

We are His arms - the arms that gathered the little children together. The arms that changed the water into wine at Cana. The hands that helped Zacchaeus down from the sycamore tree. The hands that were nailed to the cross.

We are His mouth - the mouth that proclaims the Word of God. The Word that brings light into darkness, our darkness. The Word that became flesh to dwell among us. To heal. To comfort. To give hope.

We are indeed the body of Jesus Christ - His feet, His arms, His hands, His mouth. We are His body, crucified and risen. We are the humanity He took upon Himself.

Whether we are washing the dishes, paying the bills, walking the dog, or folding laundry . . . whether we are on the bus heading for work, sitting in a business meeting or attending school, it is important for us to remember that we are not merely laborers, but are ministers of the Gospel, bringing the love of God to the world around us.

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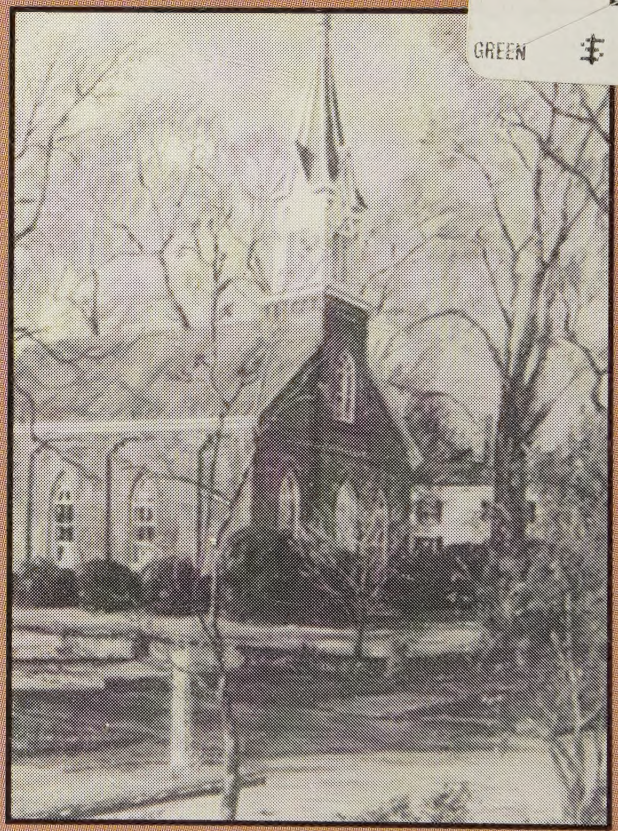

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